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THE PRESENT POSSIBILITIES OF ORAL ENGLISH IN HIGH SCHOOLS¹

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I have been asked to give an account of several experiments in oral English, made under my direction in a California high school. As I see it there are but two reasons that justify one in talking of his own work: there lies in it either a help for others or a warning. My earnest hope that my own experience may suggest a way for some other to follow is my only excuse for the very personal note of what I shall have to say in this paper.

Several years ago I became strongly convinced that English teachers in high schools were throwing too exclusive an emphasis upon written composition. About four years ago I began definitely to consider my own responsibility in this direction. In an age in which effective speech is more and more essential, I found most boys and girls talking with little ease, clearness, or force. Believing that no education is vital that does not meet the needs of living, I began to study my immediate situation to see what I could do. I found the following conditions: a curriculum shaped primarily to meet the entrance requirements of the two universities of California and already crowded to the limit; a faculty only too ready to grant the lack of ability in spoken English, but not a single department ready to give even an hour a week to improve it; a board of education eager to have the schools of Oakland stand in the front ranks, but more concerned with the work of building modern schoolhouses than the adding of new courses to the curriculum. The time was inauspicious for insistence; so I cast about to see what could be done under existing conditions. Fortunately within my own school my word was law as to the details of the English course. Hence I determined to start the work at once; to do not what we would but what we could, until we had demonstrated either that our efforts

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were not worth while or that we could accomplish enough to justify future demands. It took but one half-year to determine the latter: by that time the English department of nine, lukewarm and divided in the beginning, was a unit in favor of the new work; the faculty as a whole bore witness to improvement in the speech of the student body; the pupils themselves, although still dreading the ordeal of speaking before their mates, acknowledged its benefit and voted to have it stay, and from that time on public speaking has had as certain a place in the work of the Oakland High School as algebra, history, or Latin.

The work is of two kinds, prescribed and elective; the former consisting of regular exercises in oral composition in every class in the four years' English course, the latter consisting of a six months' class open to all students who have had two and a half years of English, and capable of being substituted for one of the regular literary courses. The latter provision makes the public-speaking class popular with boys of the practical rather than the imaginative type of mind, as well as with those who have a natural aptitude and desire for public work.

The plan of the prescribed oral composition is simple, for it is limited by conditions. There is not a specially trained teacher of public speaking in this department, and only one or two who ever raise their voices in public except under compulsion. Part of my problem was to arouse and interest my helpers. We agreed to work as a unit, to emphasize steadily and persistently a few general principles, and by our own interest in the work to try to establish its importance in the minds of the pupils. The principles insisted upon are briefly as follows:

1. Every student speaks at least three times a half-year, and more if time will permit. For this work no excuse is accepted; the law is irrevocable.
2. Work is prepared but not memorized, and no notes other than brief headings are permitted.
3. The test of success is the interest of the audience. To attain this requires careful adaptation of subject and treatment to the class addressed, clear understanding and perfect possession of the material, and an interested live manner, free from shrinking and

timidity. The ideal insisted upon is that the speaker by bearing, eye, and voice, as well as by subject-matter, must control his audience.

4. Careful organization of material is insisted upon; the principles taught in written composition are constantly emphasized, well-planned structure being even more necessary in spoken than in written discourse, since in the former the first impression must carry lasting weight.

5. The attitude of the teacher must be one of interested and sympathetic yet just criticism. Not mere talk but effective speech is the end in view.

6. Every recitation in English is made to help the special work in oral composition. Correct posture, clear, distinct articulation, and the use of complete, connected sentences are rigidly insisted upon. All special reports and readings are given from the platform.

The work of the special class in public speaking is more formal. Various types of speeches are studied and attempted, ranging from the short informal school speech to the many needed in various lines of mature life: the popular lectures, the political speech, the formal and informal debate on public questions, practice in organizing and conducting meetings, memorizing, declaiming, and imitating oratorical masterpieces—thus opportunities are limited only by time and the ingenuity of the teacher.

Of the good results in the Oakland High School of these two lines of work there can be no question. Our students as a whole speak with freedom and clearness, and many of them with considerable force. The thinking is boyish, the English not free from errors, the language still often ill chosen, but the paralyzing fear has practically gone; interest is steadily growing; and power is slowly but surely increasing. And general interest in public speaking in the school has grown steadily. Four or five years ago we had but one struggling debating society to belong to which branded a boy as a "dig" or as a general undesirable; now there are four. Inter-society debates, the kind we most believe in, are growing rapidly in popularity, an oratorical contest is one of the events of the year, and best of all, faculty coaching of our public speakers is eliminated from the school. General counsel and advice we do not refuse to

give, but it is truly general, and our speeches, such as they are, are the work of the students themselves.

I have spoken thus at length with reference to these two lines of work, not because I would recommend them as in any way better than many others, but because they have succeeded under conditions in no way specially favorable. What we have done I am convinced any school can do; all that is needed is enthusiasm, determination, steady, concentrated, systematic effort, and patience. Given these, and the results, I am sure, will not fail. I do not hesitate to say that successful work in public speaking is within the present possibilities of any modern high school, equipped with live English teachers who believe in the work and are ready to do their part. The day for talking about what we should like to do in this line is past; all that is needed is to begin to do it.

But when we have organized our work in public speaking, we have still left undeveloped two rich lines of work in oral English. I have long deplored the fact that reading aloud seems destined to become a lost art. I am one of the English teachers who believe that much of our failure with certain types of literature, particularly poetry, is due to the fact that our approach is too intellectual; moreover, I believe we are losing noble style in writing because our ears are no longer tuned to its harmonies. Having once learned the beautiful possibilities of sound in languages, our imaginations can supply the melody of the printed word, but without that sense of the rhythm of prose as well as verse, we must ever remain deaf to its music. Furthermore, there is no better test of understanding and appreciation than the ability to read aloud adequately; therefore I would have this branch of oral English a part of all high-school as well as grammar-school instruction.

Another line of work that we English teachers have been slow to develop is dramatics. One of the keenest and most abiding desires of young people is to take part in a play. Heroes and heroines they will be if they can, but if fate is not so kind, then butlers, ladies' maids, and messenger boys will content them, or even stage manager or curtain-raiser is better than nothing. Nor is the instinct confined to the socially elect; the crudest, most awkward boys, the plainest, most unpromising girls are equally ambitious. An instinct

so universal and so abiding must have an educational value; it is for us to find and profit by it. Dramatics have long had a self-found place in the Oakland High School. The Senior class play is a regular part of the June commencement festivities. A thriving dramatic society gives a play in each Christmas term; a bi-yearly entertainment in the nature of a vaudeville performance is a time-honored institution of the school; a French and a German club give occasional little plays; indeed the stern hand of authority is needed at times to establish the fact that we are a commonplace academic high school, and not a school of dramatic arts. As I have watched these various activities for the past four or five years, certain facts have become established in my mind. Under proper guidance they are good for a school, arousing, when well done, a strong school pride. They furnish a chance for self-expression to many who find no opportunity in athletics, debating, or school politics. They can be made to strengthen self-command in the individual, to stimulate team spirit and unselfish endeavor, as well as to develop the imagination and feeling necessary adequately to impersonate a character other than oneself. To accomplish for a school, however, all its possibilities, dramatics should be under faculty control. The taste of most young people of today, patterned too frequently after that of the cheap theater, and common, if not vulgar, vaudeville, turns often to plays questionable in tone and teaching; the paid coach, unless selected by the faculty, may destroy by his advice the ideals we are trying to build up; the number of students drawn upon is usually too limited to give the good possible to the many, since popularity is too often a deciding factor when students themselves pick the cast. Moreover, the work of preparing a play for presentation is unquestionably disturbing to the regular routine of the school. Therefore it should be of such a nature that a compensating good balances this evil. The only way, in my judgment, to obtain the greatest educational value from this effort lies in incorporating all the dramatic work of a school in the regular work of the English department, under the general supervision of the head of that department, but under the special direction of a teacher fitted by training and personality to develop its great possibilities. What we should work toward is the *school* play, dignified in its theme and treatment, large in its conception, uplifting and expanding to

all who take part in it. The class and dramatic club plays merely hint to us the greater possibilities beyond. For such work as could be done under proper guidance, credit could well be allowed by an English department, and thus we could control the dramatic endeavor, without arousing the antagonism that results from forcibly curtailing the freedom of our liberty-loving students.

The difficult task for a head of an English department is to find the teacher, for many qualities are needed. She must be, first, a broadly trained English student, with thorough special training in her own line of work—nothing so appeals to young people now as our ability to *do* what we advise. She must have refinement and taste, enthusiasm but poise, a winning, stimulating personality, for hers is the hard task of leading to refined rather than cheap enjoyment. There will be constant need for good sense and judgment, often for strength to say no, always for tact and patience—surely no small combination of traits for one individual to possess. I have sought long and but recently found my ideal. For four months past we have been experimenting together in trying to lay a foundation for incorporating this work into the regular English work of the school, and it is this further attempt of which I have also been asked to speak.

We have not as yet attempted to reach one ultimate goal in the matter of oral expression, but have been feeling our way to try to establish definite educational values. A sudden resignation in my department last summer made it possible for me to try two experiments at once. The greatest danger spot in high-school English work I have found to be the first half of the tenth year. I have long experimented there to find work that is truly vital, with so far but questionable success. The adolescent boy is frankly bored with most that we offer, and though you may drive him to water, drink very deeply he will not. I decided to try a radical change; to make a five months' class at this point of nothing but oral English, put it all in the hands of my specially trained teacher, and give her a chance to work out her theories unhampered by course of study or tradition. The result has been illuminating, not always just where we looked for light, but the unexpected often contains messages of wisdom equally as valuable as those sought for.

The course is planned broadly along the following lines:

1. The omission of written composition, but regular oral composition for one day each week.

2. Elementary work in voice and diction, including drill in proper placing of the voice and in enunciation and pronunciation.

3. Pantomime one day a week for the first half-term, the purpose being to teach concentration of the mind and freedom of the body. This work progressed through the following stages: (*a*) a simple still-life study in which the pupil merely took a single expressive position; (*b*) an individual action, still simple, but presenting one thing as a unit; such as, making a cake, washing the hair, pitching a ball, etc.; (*c*) action with a group of two (nursery rhymes furnished abundant material here); (*d*) action in groups with one serving as coach (fairy stories served for a beginning, and later scenes containing material for pantomime were found by the students in their home reading); (*e*) an original plot, still requiring a group of actors and a coach, the test of success being not only clear pantomimic action but the plot itself; i.e., the selection of suitable material and its successful bringing to a dramatic climax and conclusion.

4. Expressive reading, prepared and at sight, and the delivery of memorized selections, chosen by the students for some sufficient reason.

5. Impersonation of a single character.

6. Study and reading, in the second half-term, of a play, with final presentation of scenes as a test of appreciation and understanding.

6. The presenting of a scene, dramatized, by the student from some book, the author to describe stage setting, furnish stage directions, cast and train his characters, and himself take part in his play.

A full bill of fare, as you will see, too full to do justice to all, but most instructive to those of us who were critically watching results. We shall never duplicate the course exactly, but much of it we shall never let go. The following points we have established from our experiment:

1. Definite work in voice culture, much as it is needed, is practically impossible in large classes (we have worked with over thirty in a class). We could never be sure the assigned exercises were

properly done or, indeed, done at all. Much needed work in purity and projection of tone, breath control, flexibility, power, and variety has had to be omitted.

2. Memory work, so great a bugbear to most English teachers because so poor in results, has ceased in this class to be a problem. The work requires it from the beginning, and by now whole scenes are being memorized without protest. Students see a purpose in it when they are entertaining an audience.

3. The work in pantomime contains most valuable training, and would be a useful adjunct to much of the regular English work. It calls into play numerous faculties. The student must not only *create* the story, but must imagine truly suggestive action; there must be no meaningless, random motions. There must also be strong power of concentration; the mind must control the body every moment. Moreover, the body becomes liberated by this work more effectually than by any other means I know of. I have been amazed at the rapid loss of self-consciousness, even at this most self-conscious of ages.

4. The interpretation of memorized selections and the work in dramatic interpretation have been equally encouraging. The students are interested, intelligently critical of each other's attempts, and as a whole have steadily grown.

The greatest failure of the course has been in expressive reading. The grammar schools of California are not producing good readers. If the high schools are to supply the lack, they must begin with systematic training in the first year, and continue it regularly throughout this course. If this is to be done, more time must be given us for this work. In my judgment the English class is not the place for this training. Until the fundamentals of reading have been mastered, while boys and girls are still struggling over pronunciation and the difficulty of uttering consecutive words with ease, there can be no attention given to thought and feeling. Until we can get these from our students, there is no surer way to kill spirit and interest in an English hour than by oral reading.

But our experiment, as a whole, has not only established definite values; it has left us with certain definite problems to solve. We are certain our work has been too concentrated; to become as

vital as it might be, it should be begun earlier, and certain parts of it should be continued. What we have gained will be soon lost if dropped. Much of it would be of great help to our regular English work. The dramatic approach to much of our literature would go far to vitalize it; earlier work in pantomime would do much to make reading more attentive as well as to prevent self-consciousness; the portrayal of character through action would lead to fuller and more sympathetic understanding and feeling; the attempt at dramatization would teach, as no amount of theory ever will, the essential structure of a play, as well as the value of careful, understanding study. Most of us will agree to all this, but the question of the *how* remains, and in many cases presents an almost insuperable difficulty.

The first question is: Where shall we find time for the new work in a curriculum and a course already crowded to overflowing? In most schools there is no chance for separate courses in oral English, even were they desirable. I myself firmly believe they should be an inherent and indivisible part of the English work. The question, then, is: What of the old shall we let go? What hold of the new? Where, when, and how shall we put it in? Many teachers are now making sporadic attempts in these directions, but if I have learned one thing more than another in my years of English teaching, it is that only unified, systematized effort, patiently and determinedly followed by a whole department, leaves any final gain.

And this brings us to our greatest problem: Where shall we find the teachers skilled to incorporate this new work into their regular English courses? Could we start special classes our difficulty would be serious enough. In most schools the single specially trained teacher would be hard to get; the larger schools would need more, if all students were given the training. A question of available money is at once encountered. There are not many communities in which more would be cheerfully given to English teaching. In most cases we must use our present teachers if we would go to work without further delay, and I do not hesitate to say that the supply of those adequately prepared would be far below the demand. Nor is the present training of English teachers calculated to fill our needs. The college degree stands for scholarship;

unfortunately it does not stand for taste or feeling; it stands for persevering, patient effort; it does not stand for tact, good sense, and good judgment; it stands for a mastery of recondite problems; it does not stand for a knowledge of young people, and the ability to guide wisely while rousing, stimulating, and inspiring them. Nor does it even stand for the technical training we must have if we are to develop these new lines of work. English teachers' voices are not all well trained; comparatively few of such teachers are expressive, sympathetic readers; very few are effective public speakers; few have ever approached a play except by the gate of critical analysis. The colleges of today have undertaken the task of supplying the secondary schools with teachers. Upon them, therefore, rests the responsibility of sending us the helpers we need. The best-planned course in the world may fail from lack of ability to carry it out. I would urge upon those teaching oral English in our colleges and upon the Council of English Teachers that we never cease our efforts until we have succeeded in having thorough training in all lines of oral expression made a part of the requisites for a teacher's certificate in English. Give us in our teachers the broad fundamentals for these new lines of English endeavor, and we will cheerfully assume the responsibility and the burden of finding a place for the work and of proving its value. With such teachers as we now have, the present possibilities of simple but effective public speaking in our high schools are great, but beyond this we can go but a short way. With more power in our teachers, oral English in all its phases can soon be made to yield the full value it holds for modern high-school work. We stand ready and eager to put our hands to the task. I beg of the college to send us soon the helpers without whom we are powerless.